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ABSTRACT

A current trend indicates that credentials in English can and do move people successfully into business related careers. Colleges of business administration and English departments might take an important cue from the trend and work together to offer a double major or co-major in English business. Such a program would offer undergraduate students a chance to develop marketable skills in reading and writing as well as a sound knowledge of business, would help English departments serve their campuses and communities better while boosting their enrollments, and would provide the business community with high quality employees who are capable of assuming a broad range of responsibilities without extensive and expensive staff development. Coursework could include business report and public relations writing and literature dealing with the effects of industrialization on individuals, working class life-styles, blacks and women in business, and the effect of money on people and their behavior. Techniques of literary analysis could be taught using books that analyze and predict business and economic trends or that rate the literary merit of advertising "poetry" and popular culture. Arguments against such business/English programs pale in the light of the growing trend toward career switching and the potential for students to develop an awareness of language in combination with a classic business preparation. (AEA)

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The Business of Business is English!

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The Business of Business is English!

Following a current trend, a number of my English Department colleagues have recently left the ivory tower for the world of bus: ss. Most have landed on their feet in areas like public relations and law. The trend suggests two things: first, that the future for the English major in academia is increasingly gloomy, and second, that people with credentials in English can and do move sucessfully into business-related careers. The former point is by now little news, but the latter shows that expertise in reading and writing sells well in the business community, even when it is not accompanied by business experience. Colleges of business administration and English departments might take an important cue from the trend, and work together to offer a double major or co-major in English and business. A program of this sort would offer undergraduate students a chance to develop highly marketable, sophisticated skills in reading and writing as well as a sound knowledge of business; it would help English departments serve their campuses and communities better while boosting their enrollments and it would provide the business community with high quality employees, capable of assuming a broad range of responsibilities without extensive and expensive staff development.

The conventional business curriculum usually involves a series of "core courses" or basic requirements that give students background in areas like economics, finance, management and marketing. Once these requirements have been met, students choose to major in one of the these areas, and take a sequence or group of courses in the area of their choice. This sort of preparation in business, accompanied by a carefully designed set of courses in English, including sequences in writing, language studies and literature would give students a broad-based understanding of the business world, the role of language in it, and the ability to cope with the range of assignments found in business careers.

Increasingly, English departments offer composition courses as general "service" courses for all segments of the university. Along with freshman composition (for one or two quarters or semesters), many schools offer a sophomore expository writing course that may be taken by any student. At some schools, this course is required of students who wish to major in business. In addition to this expository writing course, English departments can, and do, in some cases, offer two other writing courses that would be useful to business students: a course in business report writing, and a public relations writing course that would deal with press releases and other forms of media writing. The latter course might be cross listed and perhaps offered alternately by English and journalism. Students who have chosen the marketing major may find the public relations course especially useful, while those in accounting or financial analysis might do well to take the report writing course. A side benefit of these courses may be fewer inane TV ads, and livelier annual corporate reports--a widespread boon.

Of course, neither English nor journalism professors are necessarily qualified to teach these kinds of courses, and here, cooperation with and assistance from the business school and the corporate community become essential. Business schools do offer some specialized writing courses, and they might expand and improve those offerings with the help of writing specialists. Corporations can provide valuable assistance to business schools and English departments by providing specific information on the styles and types of writing students need to learn, by exposing teachers to the corporate atmosphere in which the writing must be done, and perhaps by training the teachers in much the same way that new business school graduates are taught to write within the business or corporate setting. Ultimately, corporate cooperation might save the business community bundles of dollars in staff training costs, in addition to providing superior personnel.

Courses in language studies offered by the English department can also be tailored to the needs of the business student. My present department already

offers a course dealing with general semantics that attracts numbers of business students. Problems in denotation, connotation, ambiguity and semantic camouflage are areas of study in this course. Like the writing courses, the language course offerings could be expanded, to include a course in the language of business, in which advertising, other forms of public relations, the language of governmental bureaucracy, and propaganda techniques could be analyzed from a linguistic perspective. This course can alert students who intend to join the business world, as well as those who deal with it as consumers, to the ways in which language both conveys and conceals information about goods and services.

Finally, there are literature courses. Here, the possibilities for courses attractive to business students are quite substantial along two dimensions: a serious literary analysis sequence, and a more informal popular culture sequence. Courses in the various genres can deal with the presentation of business in literature, drawing on the work, for example, of Arthur Miller, D. H. Lawrence, and others who have written about business and industry. In addition to looking at plot, characterization and other literary matters, these courses take on a distinctive business slant when they deal with themes like the effect of industrialization on individuals and their relationships.

A second series of courses could deal with specific themes or business issues as presented in literature: working class life-styles in different times and places (Grapes of Wrath, Sons and Lovers, Letting Go) blacks and women in business and discrimination against them and others (Invisible Man), and, finally, money--its power and effect on people and their behavior (Merchant of Venice, Silas Marner). These works should be studied for both their literary merit and the insights into the business world that they afford. Some courses along these lines may already exist, and certainly, the rubrics under which such courses could be offered (authors, topics, themes, genres) are available. The literary possibilities are quite extensive, and it is surely no less valid to organize

a course around a business theme than organize one around detectives, the Holocaust, or folklore.

The techniques of literary analysis and textual criticism can also have a place in the English department's share of the business/English co-major. A former colleague of mine now in business is often called upon to read and analyze a variety of books and articles and to write critical analyses of their content for the corporate officers. Such books, which analyze and predict business and economic trends, or provide financial advice to consumers on commodities, the stock market, gold and the like, can be studied, along with, perhaps, the essays of Henry Adams or John Stuart Mill. The ability to read such texts closely, and to be able to understand and evaluate both their content and form, are skills essential to business executives at both the bottom and the top of the corporate ladder. Again, the rubrics under which such courses might be offered are readily available in most departments.

Literary analysis in particular genres might set up yet another area of course development. Autobiographies and biographies of business people (Alfred P. Sloan's My Years with General Motors, for example) can be studied as examples of one genre, perhaps in contrast to or comparison with biographies of those in the arts, the sciences, or politics. Here, business students and English majors can profit from the study of the genre as well as from the awareness of what motivates corporation presidents and other business people, as compared to other groups of people. English departments can profit from such courses as they fill up with students and do not have to be cancelled.

Poetry as a genre also figures in business, though in a less than literary or artistic fashion: consider greeting cards, and advertising. "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz" may not be great art, but it sells a product, and shares alliteration, rhyme, meter, and other poetic characteristics with more "literary" works. Developing an appreciation of poetry comes, in part, from understanding its techniques, and

in a course on poetry in and out of business, that appreciation can be derived from profit-motivated poetry as well as from that generated in an unheated garret.

The popular culture rubric provides yet another corner of the curriculum where attractive business/English courses can be developed. Plenty of best-selling pulp novels deal with business themes: a whole course could be devoted to Arthur Hailey's writings on hotels, banking, automobiles, and, most recently, the energy industry. In a somewhat more serious vein, Louis Auchincloss, among others, has written about business people and their life-styles. A course on television programs might deal with the presentation of working women (Gloria on "All in the Family," Ann Romano on "One Day at a Time," Louisa Trotter on "The Duchess of Duke Street") and working men (Archie Bunker, Fred Jefferson, and even Burt on "Soap"). TV has also addressed itself to business scams on such investigative shows as "60 Minutes" and "20/20": their reporting may be a genre in itself. Finally, a popular culture course could look into the recent explosion of popular literature (books and magazines) addressed specifically to women in business: magazines like Ms. and Working Woman, and books like John T. Molloy's The Woman's Dress for Success Book (Chicago: Follett, 1976). This course could deal with the literary merit and demerit of the materials coming out, and also with the popular literature as a reflection of the times and the changes in the social fabric of our culture.

There may be resistance to the notion of a business/English co-major on several grounds, none of which supports compelling arguments against the program. In response to declining enrollments and decreasing offerings in all the liberal arts, it is, in fact, hard to make a case for adding more courses to the curriculum. However, the business/English co-major requires relatively few truly new courses--perhaps one or two offerings in writing and language, and one or two new things in literature or popular culture--but for the most part, these themes can be added to present syllabi or inserted under course rubrics which already exist in many

English departments.

Other arguments against the program might come from the students or from the teachers in the college of business. The students might simply not be interested in the program, or might feel that they already have too much to take and to learn in business. However, two factors could easily motivate such students. First, the active cooperation of businesses with the university to develop the program should indicate to students that the co-major would probably make them more marketable than a plain business major. In addition, almost any major has some room for electives regardless of the type of subject under study. The business students might use some or all of their electives to take the sequence in English, rather than putting together a hodge-podge of courses which are not directly related to or likely to be useful in their business careers. The number of Ph.D.'s in English who have successfully moved into business jobs indicates that corporations do hire people who read and write well, even though they lack business training, and the business/English program will give students a chance to develop reading and writing skills in combination with business knowledge.

The faculty of the business school might have some of the same complaints as business students, particularly with respect to the amount of material that students must learn to get a business degree. If there is already too much for students to do, why increase their workload with a co-major? First, it should be clear that this co-major represents an option we can open up to business students. Like all majors and co-majors, no one is required to choose it. Second, my former colleagues who are enjoying success in business suggest to me that people with strong reading and writing skills are in such demand that most corporations are willing to train those who come to them with those skills to do the business parts of their jobs. Moreover, even those with plain business degrees in fields like accounting are required to attend regular staff training sessions, so that a certain amount of training is ordinarily part of most new employee's lives.

Thus, undergraduates will never be able to learn absolutely everything about their business field of choice: such mastery is not even expected in the business world.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for the business/English co-major relates to the growing trend toward "career switching." Dorothy K. Bestor writes in Aside from Teaching English, What in the World Can You Do? (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977) that " . . . many people will have three or more separate, though related, careers one after another during their working lives" (p. 59). Under these circumstances, specific vocational training is much less useful than the reading and writing skills the business/English co-major would develop. Reading and writing skills will almost surely carry over from one career to another, whereas COBOL programming may not. The business/English co-major offers business students a chance to equip themselves with highly marketable, long-term skills that will stay with them and serve them well no matter what area of business they choose.

For a minimal expansion and redirection of course offerings, the business/English co-major provides the English department with a chance to improve its service to the students and its image on campus, and, of course, a chance to attract more students. The co-major would allow students to develop skills in reading and analyzing literary and non-literary prose and to develop an awareness of language in combination with a classic business preparation in finance, management, or some other aspect of business. The business school and the business community at large certainly stand to benefit from students and executives who are better analysts, as well as better readers and writers. Altogether, the program has significant strong points, and relatively few weaknesses, and warrants serious consideration in boardrooms, faculty offices, and student hangouts.

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